

# A Texas-Size Dream

THE GREAT SOCIETY READER. The Failure of American Liberalism. Edited by Marvin E. Gettleman and David Mermelstein. 551 pp. New York: Random House. Cloth, \$8.95. Paper, \$2.45.

By ROBERT LEKACHMAN

THE GREAT SOCIETY, emerging from a Texas-size dream of unlimited growth and affluence, imagines that poverty can be abolished, slums superseded by garden apartments, the countryside beautified, the sick healed and the cities restored, all out of our massive annual increments to the Gross National Product. In its brief moment of ascendancy, circa 1964-65, the Great Society even offered the prosperous a token of appreciation for their new altruism, in the shape of substantial tax reductions. Truth to tell, the tax cuts have been more massive than the funding of all the new programs put together.

The Great Society of Lyndon Johnson is (or was) at the least a continuation of the New Deal. Some sort of general health care was contemplated and rejected by Franklin Roosevelt as a clause in the Social Security Act of 1935. After all these years Medicare is considerably more limited in coverage than schemes favored by President Truman. The job camps more than distantly echo the Civilian Conservation Corps. Johnsonian initiatives in housing, education and regional rehabilitation often have their origins, if not directly in the New Deal, then in the New Frontier where the most novel of the Great Society approaches, the War on Poverty, was planned. Seen in this way, the Great Society is no more and no less than the completion of the neglected agenda of the 1930's.

Of course there is more to the story than this; there is, for one crucial matter, the civil-rights revolution. In an eloquent moment, Franklin Roosevelt deplored the lot of the famous ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clothed one-third of a nation, without differentiating between the white and the Negro among them. Three decades later the integration as one society of poor and prosperous requires a parallel and considerably more difficult reconciliation of white and black.

The politics of the Great Society differ from those of the New Deal in still another vital way. The New Deal was a morality play, and in the drama Franklin Roosevelt conscientiously cast Big Business as the villain. In sharp contrast Lyndon Johnson embraces businessmen as enlightened partners in the search for consensual politics. Put another way, the New Deal was a not very

consistent and not very successful attempt to redistribute the nation's wealth.

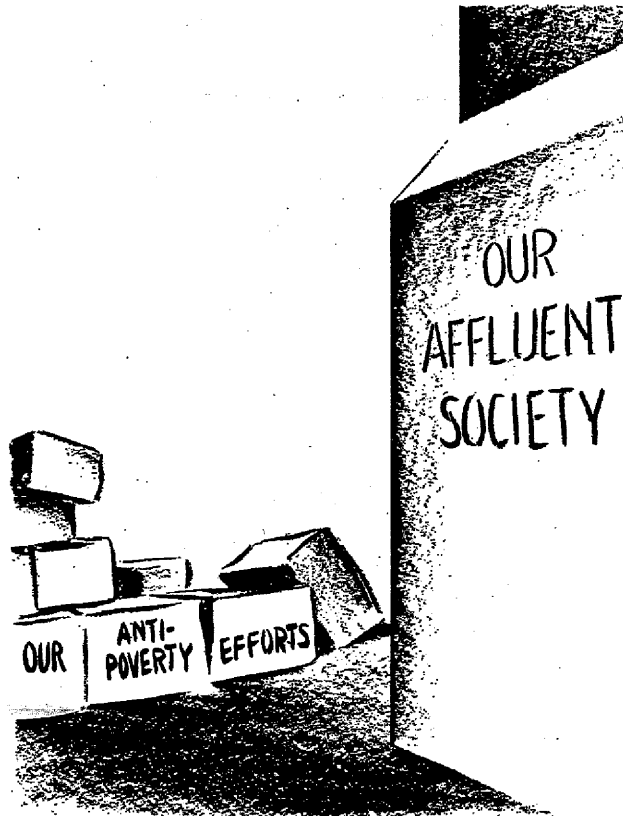
Vietnam has all but written finis to this latest episode in the history of American reform, but there were signs enough that even without Vietnam the Great Society had just about run its course. The intense opposition even in the liberal 89th Congress to rent supplements and model cities, the massive slaughter of northern liberal Democrats in the 1966 elections, the growing white backlash that imperiled open occupancy, school desegregation and the more creative aspects of the War on Poverty—all signified the exhaustion of the liberal impulse.

Thus anyone with the excellent notion of compiling a Great Society reader is almost unavoidably led to draw some instructive moral from the troubled life and grisly death of the Great Society. Is it only a replay of the familiar cowboy myth—black hats vs. white hats, enlightened liberals vs. benighted conservatives? Some judicious soul could easily organize a "fair" selection of eulogies and critiques of Great Society programs which divided the available pages between the reasonable liberals and the irresponsible reactionaries. To do so is to gloss over the fact that for a spell Lyndon Johnson did actually bring together moderate liberals and moderate conservatives. The latter were vital members of the coalition that enacted the Tax Act of 1964. Some of them supported the Job Corps, Head Start, Medicare, and even Model Cities.

THIS is not to say that important differences do not separate the Americans for Democratic Action from the Committee on Economic Development, but it is to give a clue to the organizing principle of this reader, that there is less difference between moderate liberals and enlightened conservatives than there is between both groups and their common opponents on the left. Accordingly the two editors, Marvin E. Gettleman and David Mermelstein of the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, themselves convinced radical critics of the society, have assembled one of the most exciting anthologies I can recall.

In form it is a series of confrontations between the Administration and a variegated group of assailants. On issue after issue—the economy, foreign policy, poverty, and race—Gettleman and Mermelstein start with a strongly worded expression of their own position, follow it with a statement, often by the President, of the Great Society position, and complete the section with a series of testimonies to the shortcomings and inadequacies of Administration efforts.

A representative sample is the sec-



Cartoon by Tom LHuic, The Nashville Tennessean.

tion entitled "The Black Man in the Great Society." The editors' introduction sharply denies much economic improvement in the life of American Negroes. Hard upon the introduction comes the President's celebrated Howard University speech on the Negro family, the start of the Moynihan Report controversy. Next is Bayard Rustin's call for a civil-rights coalition of liberal intellectuals, Negroes and trade unionists. The dissenters have the rest of the section to themselves. They include Ronald Radosh's defense of Black Power as a far superior political alternative to coalition, a Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee assault upon lax enforcement of the school desegregation provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and a revealing excerpt from a hearing before the United States Commission on Civil Rights on what happens in Mississippi to Negroes who try to register to vote.

The Great Society's critics come from both the old and the New Left. Different varieties of Marxists vie with black-power advocates and devotees of participatory democracy.

One cannot reasonably expect a consistent intellectual line. According to their custom, Marxists see remedies only in drastic alterations of political and economic arrangements. Usually comparatively innocent of doctrine, their New Left colleagues often seem to anticipate a change in men's hearts. For their part, the black-power advocates occasionally substitute the noble black man for the noble proletarian of older myth.

Although this anthology almost flouts the current intellectual weaknesses of the left, the moderate and the conservative can derive only a false comfort from the intramural quarrels of their enemies. The left, which has attracted some of the ablest and the best of the young, is in the grip of an emotion, a revulsion at American society, which will in due course generate its own ideology. In the meantime, the two editors deserve general thanks for their revelations of the narrow limits of the Great Society and their achievement in constructing an anthology that can be read straight through as an emotional as well as an intellectual experience.

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